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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 013025

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM SOCI KISL CH  
SUBJECT: CHALLENGING MEDIA TABOOS IN XINJIANG

REF: BEIJING 11753

Classified By: Classified by Acting Political Internal Unit Chief Susan Thornton. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

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¶1. (C) Xinjiang journalists face particularly heavy restrictions stemming from Xinjiang's unique political sensitivities and large ethnic minority population. The local media is generally prohibited from reporting on interethnic disputes, matters pertaining to terrorism or separatism as well as most international topics, according to a journalist for Xinjiang's most widely read tabloid. The government fears that even minor stories with ethnic undertones could spark unrest. Despite these challenges, one investigative journalist has persisted in her attempts to expose rights violations, particularly those linked to corruption and forced evictions that have become endemic to Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital. Another bright spot is a Xinjiang Radio live program that helps callers obtain official redress for grievances. End Summary.

Sensitivity of Ethnic Issues

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¶2. (C) Journalists in Xinjiang must follow particularly stringent reporting guidelines due to the political sensitivities surrounding Xinjiang's large minority and especially Uighur Muslim population, according to Li Ping, a reporter for the City Life News Morning Post, Xinjiang's most widely read tabloid. Li, who investigates legal issues, explained to Poloffs during a late May trip to Xinjiang that articles drafted on "East Turkestan independence forces" or other matters pertaining to terrorism or separatism are almost never published in the local media. Even the few articles that are eventually approved are extremely diluted.

¶3. (C) The City Life News Morning Post editor refused to publish Li's report on a recent case in which the police confiscated "illegal materials espousing jihad," distributed in the predominately Uighur Erdaoqiao neighborhood of Urumqi, she said. The propaganda department also restricts journalists from reporting on interethnic disputes that occur sporadically in the region. A story Li covered about an interethnic murder of four bus passengers near the northern city of Kelemai was rejected by her supervisor, while eventually appearing in a different paper in a very abridged version.

¶4. (C) Even seemingly innocuous pieces that deal with ethnic issues are frequently censored, Li asserted.

For example, Li's editor did not approve an article she wrote about a Uighur taxi driver who died after falling asleep at the wheel, ostensibly due to overwork. The government fears that such stories could fuel ethnic unrest, so editors are extremely reluctant to publish anything about minorities, she remarked. While Xinjiang borders several countries, the local media is also prohibited from reporting on international topics. Li recalled a legal case in which an Azerbaijani businessman owed a large sum of money to a Xinjiang merchant, who after two years took the foreigner to court. Although the presiding judge was willing to grant Li an interview, her editor would not publish the story because it involved a foreign national, which she was told could have negative consequences for China's foreign relations.

Dedicated Investigative Journalist

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¶ 15. (C) Despite the numerous restrictions she faces in reporting on sensitive legal topics, Li remains dedicated to exposing corruption and rights violations, especially in connection to urban development, another politically charged subject. The City of Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, plans to demolish 300,000 square meters of "illegal housing" this year, she stated. However, much of the housing the government defines as "illegal" was actually purchased by residents through what they mistakenly regarded as legitimate channels. Many of these people were unknowingly swindled by corrupt officials or developers, who had no legal right to sell the property. The Urumqi Government's attempts to

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repossess these homes to make room for development projects have produced a major backlash from residents, Li asserted.

¶ 16. (C) Li noted one such incident she recently witnessed in which a mob of over 70 disgruntled residents, mostly Hui Muslims from Urumqi's Tianshan District, gathered to protest the imminent demolition of their homes, which had been deemed illegal by the city. Protesters proceeded to clash with local police officers sent to prevent residents from disrupting the project. When the district head, a Uighur man, arrived at the scene in attempt to calm the situation, a protester hurled a rock through his car window. Having viewed the whole heated episode from the shelter of a nearby building, Li lamented that her detailed report on the incident never appeared in the newspaper.

¶ 17. (C) Li said she was also in the process of tracking a case in which a city official presented a piece of land as a "gift" to his friend, a district public security bureau chief. The local police chief, having been presented the land, filed suit against a resident on the property who refused to move. During the court hearing, the defendant argued that the police chief did not have a property deed for the land so there was no legal basis for the eviction. This left the judge in a difficult position. According to Li, the judge has still not decided whether to issue a just verdict in support of the defendant or succumb to pressures to back a powerful local official as is generally expected of the court system. Li drafted a report on the story but only a couple lines of the original piece survived the editing process.

Residents Seek Redress through the Radio

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¶ 18. (C) In spite of heavy censorship, Li asserted that

the Xinjiang media is striving to play a role in protecting ordinary citizens' rights with some success. The daily radio talk show "Distant Mountain" (yuan shan) helps resolve Xinjiang residents' grievances, according to mid-20s host Zhou Jianjun (Reftel). Callers to the program discuss problems they face, frequently citing instances of official corruption, rights violations and forced relocation. Zhou brings these issues to the attention of the appropriate Xinjiang government agencies, which are supposed to investigate and help resolve callers' problems.

¶9. (C) Zhou emphasized that just a few years ago allowing residents to express their grievances during a live broadcast would have been out of the question. He acknowledged that callers are screened before they are allowed on air and that certain sensitive topics are not permitted to be discussed, especially issues that directly criticize high-level officials or involve ethnic tensions. Zhou asserted that the show has become very popular, adding that he has received a great deal of positive feedback from callers, many of whom are ethnic minorities. One Shihezi City resident who learned of the program traveled several hundred kilometers to Urumqi to seek Zhou's assistance in resolving a land dispute with local officials. Zhou subsequently put the man in touch with the appropriate departments. Zhou noted that his show is only conducted in Chinese and said he was uncertain if a similar Uighur-language program existed.

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